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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development and operation of a high school orientation program using peer facilitators. The activities of the administrative team (two school social workers, a guidance counselor, and an assistant principal) are described, as is training of upper classmen to be peer facilitators for freshmen orientation. A brief description of the program's implementation is presented along with results of an evaluation of the project; program participants compared to nonparticipants reported less difficulty starting their classes and fewer feelings of isolation. A modified version of the program is suggested for individual transfer students. Finally, other uses for peer facilitators are considered. (MCF)

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TRAINING AND USING PEER FACILITATORS FOR ORIENTATION OF STUDENTS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Colleges and universities have long had organized orientation programs, (Scott and Warner, 1974). Such programs were developed to aid in the stressful, difficult transition that entering a new educational institution can be. Orientation programs most often attempt to familiarize new students with the campus; to introduce new students to each other and to upper classpersons; and to acquaint new students with the policies, procedures, rules and regulations most likely to affect them. In our experience, public secondary schools have been less likely to provide systematic orientation for new students. At this level, such orientation as occurs usually is provided informally on a one to one basis as needs arise. Often this less formal orientation occurs in reaction to a mistake or error on the part of the new student and can be experienced as a criticism or reprimand. As such, this event may then undermine the new student's sense of self-confidence and competence.

While the transition from junior high or middle school to high school is not often considered one of life's major transitional crises,(as entry into college is) it is, nonetheless, a major change in the life of the adolescent (Samuels and Fain, 1977). This change requires significant psycho-social adjustments by the adolescent. The new student will have to learn how to effectively relate to a new array of administrators, teachers, and other personnel; to find ways to fit in with a much larger student body; to adjust from having been among the older, more mature persons at junior high or middle school to now being again in the younger, least mature group; to bear the increased responsibility of making a variety of decisions which can have a significant bearing on one's future in the world of work or higher education; to maintain or enhance a network of supporting persons; and to accept

the challenge of functioning successfully at this more mature independent stage of education and growth.

Viewed from the standpoint of administrators, staff and students at the high school, this influx of new uninitiated persons requires a return to a previous stage of development which demands that these persons once again participate in the teaching of tasks that they have already mastered for themselves. The beginning of the school year cycle requires a number of special activities which while recognized as necessary, are also frequently experienced as being of secondary importance and even distracting energy and attention from the primary goal of the school - education.

At a large campus, these concerns of new students and of persons already in place at the high school are compounded by geography and the size of the student population. The campus involved in this project covers 49.6 acres, includes five major classroom buildings (each with its own administration, staff and faculty) and a student population of 3500 during the 1984-1985 school year. Consideration of these three clusters of factors indicated that an orientation program would be an asset.

This paper will offer a description of the development and operation in a high school of a program employing peer facilatators to aid in the orientation of the new entering class and of transfer students. Strategies of organization, training, implemention and evaluation will be discussed too.

The use of peer facilitators to conduct orientation programs at the secondary school level also has a parallel in the orientations at colleges and universities. Peer facilitation can be seen as a logical extension of two recent trends in human service delivery systems; the use of paraprofessionals and the development of self-help groups. Beginnings of peer facilitation can be traced to the publication of Caring and Sharing: Becoming a Peer Facilitator by Tom Erney and Robert Myrick(1978).

and to their work prior to publication.

The use of peer facilitators to conduct orientation in secondary schools is based on at least three considerations. One, that the skills and behaviors used by those conducting orientation do not require professional training and expertise and can be readily taught to high school students. Secondly, the opportunity to conduct orientation allows students to feel more a part of the operation of their school and it guides their behavior into productive channels. Finally, having other students conduct orientation for them allows new students to feel welcome and included in the school's community while also holding out to them by example the opportunity to participate in the operation of school activities themselves in the future.

As employed herein, orientation refers to a variety of activities designed to introduce students completing their final year of junior high school or middle school to the high school that they will be attending at the beginning of the new school year. A majority of the activities take place during the closing months of the final junior high year while others are conducted during the opening week of the first year at high school (Mazur, 1977). A modified version of the orientation is conducted on an individual basis for new students who transfer to the school in the midst of the school year.

PROFESSIONAL PERSONNEL AND ROLES

Under the aegis of Pupil Personnel Services, school social workers in this school system were charged with the responsibility for introducing and putting into effective operation the concept of peer facilitation.

As school social workers are support personnel who provide service on a system-wide basis, it was recognized quickly that the participation of school based personnel would also be essential to establishing an effective peer facilitation

program at any one school. The two social workers assigned to serve the various component parts of the high school consulted with the supervising principal who assigned an assistant principal and a guidance counselor to help develop the peer facilitation program. These four persons then met and functioned jointly as a management team for the peer facilitator program.

This management team then began to guide the development and implementation of the peer facilitator program. Early efforts were devoted to learning about peer facilitation, visiting schools where peer facilitation programs were in operation, reviewing possible directions in which peer facilitation might move, introducing the concept of peer facilitation to faculty and generating broad goals to help define the beginning directions of the peer facilitation program. Time and effort were given to indentifying the qualities and characteristics sought in peer facilitators and to recruiting, screening and selecting potential peer facilitators. All members of the management team shared in these responsibilities. The assistant principal assumed primary responsibility for the communications with students, parents and faculty that were part of the recruiting, nominating, selecting and notifying processes and for arranging time, place and facilities for program activities. This person also maintained communications between the management team and the supervising principal.

One of the specific projects of the peer facilitator program was to train students to conduct orientation for incoming freshmen. The guidance counselor and the assistant principal worked together to recruit additional counselors and school based personnel to serve as trainers for this project. The school social workers assumed primary responsibility for identifying the content of training, for developing materials and activities, for structuring the process of training and for planning the evaluation process. The assistant principal secured necessary transportation to and from the campus for those students who were to receive

orientation. He also formed the student orientation leaders into teams, matched teams with small groups of students to be oriented and planned varied sequences of orientation so that teams and their respective groups would not be in the same place(s) simultaneously. Training of the student orientation leaders was accomplished by members of the management team and by additional guidance counselors recruited solely for that purpose. Actual orientation was then conducted by the high school students with some guidance and supervision from the management team.

COORDINATION WITH SCHOOL PERSONNEL

The management team approached the task of planning peer facilitated orientation with enthusiasm and idealism. They assumed that properly trained and prepared juniors and seniors could do everything necessary to orient the 1750 students of the entering class. Activities were developed, training was planned and schedules were formulated based upon this belief.

Reality struck when the thorough and extensive orientation schedule was presented to the supervising principal for approval. In the principal's view, there was no possibility that the project could take place as planned. The number and the extent of actvities would interfere too greatly with other necessary activities which also have to take place during the first several days of the school year. Plans for the opening days of school had to be severely curtailed. This curtailment had a demoralizing effect upon the management team and upon the student orientation leaders.

While the lines of communication with the supervising principal were open and functioning during the planning and preparation for orientation, the management team failed to be sufficiently specific in making progress reports and hence did not elicit clear guidelines and limits from the supervising principal.

Participation of the school guidance counselor slowly decreased as the project

continued. In part, at least, this was due to the fact that working with peer facilitators was assigned as an additional duty with no corresponding reduction in other duties.

Training and orientation activities were all scheduled during the school day thus disrupting teachers and the involved students' classes.

TRAINING OF PEER FACILITATORS TO CONDUCT ORIENTATION

From a student body of approximately 2500 students attending the subject high school, 87 were selected to be trained to conduct orientation activities for the incoming class and for transfer students new to the school district. Sixty students eventually completed the training and served as student orientation leaders.

Training was designed in three modes to provide trainees with repeated presentations of the content of each session. Orientation activities were conducted by trainers with trainees participating as if they were being conducted through orientation by the trainer. This was followed by discussion in which reaction to the activity and rationale for the activity were discussed. Finally, trainees were given the opportunity to take the role of orientation leader and to conduct the activity again with other trainees as participants. Training was further structured such that each group of trainees worked with a different trainer for each training session to provide a variety of leadership styles which might serve as role models for the time when the trainees would be leading orientation groups on their own. Efforts were made to limit each training group to from 17 to 18 students to maximize opportunity for participation and role playing experiences.

Training sessions were limited to one class period each day for six days; spaced over six weeks and varied so that trainees missed only one class meeting of any class while in training.

Each training session offered step by step instruction to student orientation leaders covering both the interpersonal skills required for small group activities and the content of orientation itself (Samuels and Fain, 1977).

A variety of "get acquainted" exercises were provided (adapted from Pfieffer and Jones, 1972). An overview of the purpose and procedures of orientation was given. Student orientation leaders were given instructions for reviewing the student handbook, for introducing extra curricular activities, and for introducing the variety of student support services available at the high school. Also provided were instructions for conducting a tour of the campus which included visits to the administrative offices, counselor's offices, paper shops, libraries and lunchrooms of each of the buildings on campus.

IMPLEMENTATION

The subject school is a large high school which at the time of the program anticipated the arrival of approximately 1725 - 1775 new students from the two middle schools which feed the high school.

Peer facilitators trained to conduct the orientation activities were formed into orientation teams of two or three facilitators each (Canning, 1983) so that no facilitator would have to conduct orientation by himself and to allow for unexpected absences or other demands which might arise to prevent a facilitator's participation in one activity or another. There were 20 teams of facilitators.

The assistant principal who served on the management team met with the two principals of the middle schools. He explained the orientation activities that were planned and he made the necessary plans for schedules and transportation to allow the middle school students to visit the high school during their final weeks as middle school students. In order to accomodate the large number of students, these visits took place on four days. Nearly 450 students participated in orien-

tation on each of these days. Each team of facilitators conducted orientation with a group of 20 - 25 participants on each of the four days.

In addition to this large scale orientation program scheduled in the final weeks of the school year, peer facilitators in each building on the campus were available to offer individualized orientation at any point of the school year when new students transferred from other schools.

EVALUATION

The evaluation tool used was a ten item questionnaire employing Likert type scaled responses administered to 232 members of the entering class of September 1982 and to 267 members of the entering class of September 1983. Students who entered the high school in September 1982 did not have the opportunity to participate in orientation; those who entered in September 1983 did have that opportunity. Thus the earlier group serves to provide base line information while the latter group provides the experimental measures. As the questionnaire was designed locally without any attempt to adhere to recognized standards of instrument construction, the results are valuable only as one possible source of feedback regarding the perceived value of the orientation experience to those who participated. Other sources of feedback are the expressed attitudes and reactions of the student orientation leaders and the comments and observations of faculty and staff who were introduced to and offered comments to the orientation groups as part of the groups' introduction to campus personnel.

While responses to the questionnaire cannot be shown to have been directly influenced by participation in the student conducted orientation program, the authors are convinced that the greater ease of adjustment during the opening weeks of school reported by the experimental group was at least partially due to

the orientation program.

Comparison of the responses of each group to the questionnaire showed movement by the experimental group in the predicted direction for eight of the ten items. Students who participated in orientation experienced less difficulty getting started in their classes. Of the base line group, 52% reported difficulty getting started in classes; after orientation, only 34% of the experimental group reported similar difficulty. Forty-eight percent of the base line group reported feeling alone and isolated on this large campus; of those who participated in orientation, only 29% reported having such feelings. Prior to orientation, 49% of the respondents knew how to get answers to questions they might have; following participation in orientation, 59% of the respondents saw themselves as having that same ability. These are among the most desired results of orientation programs for new students (Milner and Borgard, 1978; Canning, 1983).

OTHER USES FOR PEER FACILATATORS

The literature abounds with a variety of roles for which secondary school students have been trained as peer facilitators: the role of peer tutor or study skills trainer; the role of friendly listener and guide to decision making; the role of leader or co-leader in small group counseling; the role of Big Brother/ Big Sister; the role of trainer in effective social skills such as listening, communications, problem solving and assertiveness; the role of case finding and referral; and the role of assistant to the counselor as well as the role of orientation leader. (See Myrick and Bowman, 1981, for description of several projects for which peer facilitators can be trained).

Peer facilitators can be used to serve the general student body or their services can be targeted to special populations including students involved with the juvenile justice system,(Samuel and Fain, 1977) deprived and neglected

students, exceptional students, disruptive students, hospitalized or homebound students, underachieving students and chronic absentees. Beyond the school setting, peer facilitators can also offer valuable community service to teen oriented "hotlines," to programs promoting awareness and prevention of child abuse and to support programs for latch-key children.

Given the idealism and energy of our adolescents, the uses of peer facilitators are restricted more by the imagination and energy of the adults who must provide linking, training, and supervision than by any inherent limitations of the young people themselves.

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